

France allows some COVID-19-infected medics to keep working

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Nurses look at a screen near rooms with patients suffering from COVID-19, in the ICU unit at the Charles Nicolle public hospital, in Rouen, France, April 15, 2021. France is rolling out a new rule that will allow health workers who are infected with the coronavirus but have few or no symptoms to keep treating patients rather than self-isolate. The extraordinary stop-gap measure is an attempt to address staff shortages at hospitals caused by an unprecedented explosion in virus infections. Credit: AP Photo/Christophe Ena, File

France is allowing health care workers who are infected with the coronavirus but have few or no symptoms to keep treating patients rather than self-isolate, an extraordinary stopgap measure aimed at easing staff shortages at hospitals and other facilities caused by an unprecedented explosion in cases.

The special exemption to France's quarantine rules being rolled out to hospitals, elderly care homes, doctors' offices and other essential health services testifies to the growing strain on the French medical system by the fast-spreading omicron variant.

It is a calculated risk, with the possibility that health care workers with COVID-19 could infect colleagues and patients being weighed against what the government says is a need to keep essential services running.

Outside the health sector, for those not covered by the special exemption, France's quarantine rules require at least five days of self-isolation for the fully vaccinated who test positive. For the unvaccinated, self-isolation is at least seven days.

Governments and industries have warned that isolation rules are creating staff shortages across a range of sectors as the omicron variant causes surges in infections in many countries. In some places, quarantines have been shortened, including France, to get workers back to their posts.

But in Europe, France appears to be alone in now also opening up the possibility for health care personnel to work while infected.

There are increasing signs that the variant causes less-severe disease. But the deluge of infections is still sending increasing numbers of people to hospitals, putting those institutions under pressure, especially when medical workers are absent, too.

French hospital authorities said the new flexibility from self-isolation would help them plug staffing holes if and when they open up.



A nurse cares for a patient inside an operating room now used for COVID-19 patients at Bichat Hospital, AP-HP, in Paris, April 22, 2021. France is rolling out a new rule that will allow health workers who are infected with the coronavirus but have few or no symptoms to keep treating patients rather than self-isolate. The extraordinary stop-gap measure is an attempt to address staff shortages at hospitals caused by an unprecedented explosion in virus infections. Credit: AP Photo/Lewis Joly, File

"If the system becomes very strained and 50% of our staff are positive, the less symptomatic will come to work because the patients will still

need to be cared for," said Dr. Marc Leone, head of anesthesiology at the North Hospital in the southern city of Marseille.

"But we're not in that situation yet," he said.

The new rules were detailed in a Health Ministry alert message that was addressed Sunday to hospitals, care facilities and health authorities and was seen by The Associated Press. The changes are being rolled out this week.

The ministry alert said France's deluge of virus infections poses "a major risk of disruption to the offer of care." It described the measure as "exceptional and temporary" and said it will be lifted when the system isn't so saturated with virus cases.

The exemption opens the possibility for doctors, hospital staff, and those working with the disabled and other vulnerable people to stay on the job despite testing positive, on condition that they are fully vaccinated and aren't coughing and sneezing.

In the Paris region, hospitals said the measure could be applied as a last resort if infected staff are urgently needed to help keep services open and if they volunteer to work.

"If they are tired, have a scratchy throat and prefer to stay at home, nobody will force them to come to work with COVID," said Romain Eskenazi, communications director for two hospitals in the French capital's northern suburbs.

Professor Rémi Salomon, a commission president for the Paris hospitals' authority, said that while staff absences are "a major problem," allowing infected staff to work is "extremely hard to implement."



Nurses care for a patient with COVID-19 in the intensive care unit at the la Timone hospital in Marseille, southern France, Dec. 31, 2021. France is rolling out a new rule that will allow health workers who are infected with the coronavirus but have few or no symptoms to keep treating patients rather than self-isolate. The extraordinary stop-gap measure is an attempt to address staff shortages at hospitals caused by an unprecedented explosion in virus infections. Credit: AP Photo/Daniel Cole, File

"Health workers say to themselves, 'I'm scared of transmitting the virus to patients,'" he told broadcaster France Info.

The Health Ministry instructions say that, where possible, the infected workers shouldn't be in contact with unvaccinated patients or those at

greater risk of severe illness with COVID-19.

The ministry said they also must limit as much as possible their interactions with colleagues and cannot take part in shared activities where face masks are removed, such as breaks for food and drinks.

With Europe's highest number of confirmed daily virus cases, France is in an increasingly challenging position.

France's average daily case load has more than doubled in a week, and the country reported a record 332,252 daily virus cases Tuesday as the omicron variant burdens hospital staff and threatens to disrupt health care, transportation, schools and other services.

More than 20,000 people are hospitalized with the virus in France, a number that has been rising steadily for weeks but not as sharply as infection rates.

COVID-19 patients fill more than 72% of France's ICU beds, and the once-renowned health care system is again showing signs of strain. Most virus patients in ICUs are not vaccinated, though 77% of the population has had at least two doses.

More than 124,000 people with the virus have died in France, among the world's higher recorded death tolls.

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